

# “Only lean & mean production will be able to maintain itself in Europe”

■ KURT DE CAT ■

**In the current economic climate, the call for efficiency is loud and urgent. Dataline, known for its MIS/ERP software MultiPress, is experiencing a momentum for investment in automation. “The higher the labour cost, the more efficient you have to produce,” knows Dirk Deroo, founder and CEO of Dataline. In the run-up to Fespa Amsterdam and Drupa in Düsseldorf, we had a conversation about key market trends and how the software company is responding to them.**

Dirk Deroo has just returned from the French trade fair C!Print in Lyon when we speak to him at Dataline's headquarters in Zedelgem. The software company holds European ambitions and is a regular participant in European print fairs. Approximately a dozen events are on the agenda each year, with notable ones this spring including Fespa Amsterdam (from 19 to 22 March) and Drupa in Düsseldorf (from 28 May to 7 June), where Dataline occupies a 100-square-metre booth in hall 7a. Established in 1997, the company has experienced substantial growth and now operates in 26 countries, serving over a thousand print businesses that utilize the MultiPress software.

**The year 2023 was the year of international acceleration for Dataline with the acquisition of Spanish Palmart a deal in Finland. How do you look back on the year?**

DIRK DEROO. “In terms of dynamics, we are rekindling the momentum from before the coronavirus pandemic. Our turnover has increased by 20 per cent to 8.2 million euros. We have made significant investments in talent acquisition, recruiting an average of two people per month. Currently, our team consists of 85 individuals. We are reinforcing our organization on all fronts, expanding middle management. Andy Willaert has recently joined us as COO, bringing valuable expertise in international teams and finance.”

**You have been building an international buy-and-build strategy for some time. How is that going at the moment?**

DEROO. “We are currently in discussions with several parties. When I initiated the internationalization efforts in 2017, the initial assumption was that we could manage everything from Belgium. However, this proved to be a misjudgment. Each country possesses its own language and culture, and it's crucial to respect these differences. Our main hurdle lies in the lack of understanding and the presence of local players who can communicate in the native language. We need scale to grow the business, to develop the solutions the industry demands. A significant advantage of our scale is the increasing interest from international professionals considering joining Dataline. Since the beginning of this year, Michael Melis (previously associated with Kodak, EFI, etc.) has joined us as a business developer. Additionally, Ewout Maartense has bolstered our Dutch business development team, bringing experience from companies like Apple, Scitex, Kodak, Landa, and Scodix. They see the importance of automation.”



“The “delusion of the day” is the biggest pitfall there is,” says Dirk Deroo, Dataline's CEO.

**How are you experiencing the European market at the moment?**

DEROO. “It is a difficult market but we do have a solution to the problems that are emerging. In that context, it is a godsend that Belgium is a forerunner. What we saw happening here 10 years ago, we are now seeing in a country like Spain, for example. Labour costs are rising, orders are under pressure, the economy is ailing, people cannot find staff that fits their business. Everything is under pressure in Europe. I don't know

a single company where order volume has increased or even stayed the same. That's all down by 20, 30, 40 per cent. But the number of orders is rising spectacularly. The machines can handle that but for the administration it's dramatic, they can't keep up. That is where the bottleneck is but the last thing people are going to do is shoot themselves in the foot. Everyone is thinking about job security. That's the challenge for us: implement software and be cautious of the people working there. We need to give people perspective. Panic is not necessary, it's about switchover of certain profiles.”

**What are your plans for 2024, a key Drupa year?**

DEROO. “We want to strengthen the company even more broadly. We have been investing in the development of Artificial Intelligence in our business for two years. We will launch the results at Drupa. It's essentially about how to stay competitive as a print business. We know that the administrative cost of a print order is typically 40 percent of the total cost. You can reduce that percentage to 10-12 per cent at pretty much all companies. That is often the only place where production companies can make savings. That's also the exercise we do with potential customers, we try to calculate how much administrative cost is on each order. If that percentage is higher than 20 per cent, then we can work on it, otherwise we pass. If we can't make the difference, we don't do it. Our capacity is not infinite, so we have to aim well. With Artificial Intelligence, we want to increase our chance of success.”

**AI seems to be everywhere these days. What exactly can the technology mean for MultiPress?**

DEROO. “With AI, we want to be able to predict which products a print business can survive on. What can the machines do and what are the chances of success? It's part reporting and trying to predict what certain products will do in the markets. There is a lot of data available, we already know a lot. Now we also need to be able to make reliable predictions with it and communicate them comprehensively to the target audience. That is why we are talking intensively



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Dirk Deroo: “We need scale to grow the business and develop the solutions the industry demands.” (here with the team at the C!Print trade fair in Lyon).

with machine manufacturers. They want to be able to sell and replace machines. We want to retain our customers, make them profitable and ensure that production remains in Europe. This can only be done by being lean and mean. In Europe, every country has a neighbouring country where production can be cheaper. The higher your labour cost, the more efficient you have to produce. You can be ten per cent more efficient than your neighbours anyway by organisational interventions. You have to want to do it. The “delusion of the day” is the biggest trap there is.”

**How can AI counter this “delusion of the day”?**

DEROO. “AI makes software more intelligent. Make or buy is a basic question in the print industry. Do we produce it ourselves or do we buy it? On which machine are we going to produce what? AI technology can be trained to answer these questions. Experienced estimators can also make these trade-offs but we often see a lot of human bias. AI can change people's behaviour, that's what it's about. The big challenge is that you need a lot of data and people have to be open to sharing that volume to gain insights.”

**Meanwhile, MultiPress has been around for 20 years. How do you see the software evolving in the coming years?**

DEROO. “We are ambitious, we are constantly thinking about what we will do in five and 10 years' time. Product development is a constant although it is not always visible to the outside world. At Drupa, we are launching the cloud version of MultiPress. Today, about 20 customers are already working with it. Product development is all about the functional contribution: what does it deliver? It is also more and more about connectivity, something we have been working on for a long time. You also have to look at the needs of the market. For example, a lot of money is lost in order logistics. Those are hidden costs. That's why we work with transport platforms like nShift, Sendcloud and Bumbal.”